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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of a pilot study was to investigate the educational motivation of rural native Appalachian eighth grade females in terms of educational attitudes, educational decisions, and educational self-concept. Results from the study (sample size: 27) indicate strongly that female Appalachian adolescents, about to enter womanhood, do have achievement and educational goals. Eighth grade Appalachian females feel very secure in their elementary school environment, have definite and positive life and career expectations, but also feel ambivalent about the upcoming high school experience due to predicted less personal contact with the high school faculty. After about midpoint in the freshman year of high school, there seems to be a breaking point in which the rural Appalachian female begins to succeed more strongly in school (65%) or begins to struggle more desperately (35%), with this struggle being largely attributed to this actual or perceived lack of personal contact with the high school faculty. Thus, Appalachian females must be made to feel more secure in the larger high school environment in order to succeed and want to complete their high school experience. (Author/MH)

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Educational Attitudes, Decisions, and Self-Concept: A Look at Appalachian Females Moving from the Elementary Experience to the High School Experience

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ABSTRACT

Schools in Appalachia have been dubbed as failures when measured by traditional educational norms as student achievement levels, dropout rates, and the percentage of high school graduates going on to college. In reference to this statement, the primary objective of this pilot study was to investigate the educational motivation of rural native Appalachian eighth grade females in terms of educational attitudes, educational decisions, and educational self concept. Results from this study indicate strongly that female Appalachian adolescents, about to enter womanhood, do have achievement and educational goals. Eighth grade Appalachian females feel very secure in their elementary school environment, have definite and positive life and career expectations, but also feel ambivalent about the upcoming high school experience due to predicted less personal contact from the high school faculty. After about midpoint in the freshman year of high school, there seems to be a breaking point in which the rural Appalachian female begins to succeed more strongly in school or begins to struggle more desperately, with this struggle being largely attributed to this actual or perceived lack of personal contact with the high school faculty.

The Appalachian region covers West Virginia and parts of twelve other states: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. Appalachia has a population of almost 19 million or about 9% of the total population of the United States. The population is primarily rural-dwelling (about 60% in 1970); however, only a small proportion of the population is employed nowadays in agriculture (less than 10%). The region is economically underdeveloped with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, a high rate of poverty (18% in 1970 compared to 14% nationally), low income levels (81% of the national average income level in 1972), and low levels of education (in 1976, 48% of all adults had not finished high school compared to 37% nationally).

Like the region itself, Appalachian studies have received little attention until recently. The 1970's witnessed a tremendous increase in literature dealing with Appalachia. Much of this, however, is polemical and rhetorical, written more as a result of an increasing ethnic pride rather than on the basis of careful data collection.

Educational research in Appalachia is almost nonexistent. There have been no systematic inquiries into problems of textbook and teacher stereotyping, teaching multi-cultural populations, or educational incongruities as they relate to Appalachia. Many social commentators, most of whom are native to Appalachia, have written about their own views on the weaknesses of education in Appalachia and their perscriptions for remedying the situation (Branscome 1972, 1976; Browning 1978; Clark 1974; Ikenberry 1978; Ogletree 1978; Miller 1977). These writers have dealt with many of the same issues that have been emphasized in research on ethnic minorities in the United States: issues of educational prejudice, alienation, stereotyping, and cultural misunderstanding and conflict. However, their observations are without replicable, empirical data for support. This is not to suggest that they are necessarily wrong, but only that there is little solid evidence to support their views.

The few community studies of Appalachia that have been done have often included observations about education and schools (Beaver 1976;

Foster 1977; Hicks 1976; Weller 1965; Stephenson 1968). However, these observations have generally been limited parts of the studies and in no case has education and the schools been a focus or even a major part of the study. Nevertheless, the observations that have been made in these studies suggest that schools in Appalachia do have many of the same problems that face other schools serving more familiar ethnic groups. For example, Weller states, "since the forms of education were imposed from the outside and did not grow up as an expression of the culture, teaching what the mountaineer wanted his children to learn, there has traditionally been a resistance to 'book learning'" (1965:108). Weller finds Appalachians believe too much schooling is dangerous, unnecessary, and destroys the egalitarian nature of their society. On the other hand, Hicks (1976) found a more positive attitude toward education in the ideal sense in the North Carolina mountain community he investigated. However, this more positive attitude was significantly tempered by disappointing experiences in the real world of the school where rural students were stereotyped as backward, ignorant, and rowdy. Reck and Reck (1980) have found the same stereotyping and its consequent negative effect on educational decisions to exist in the Appalachian high school.

The lack of attention that Appalachia has received from educational researchers is even more surprising given the fact that schools in Appalachia appear to have been "failures" as measured by such traditional educational norms as student achievement levels, dropout rates, and the percentage of high school graduates going on to college (Jamison 1978). For example, Caudill (1962) notes that high school graduates in Harlan County, Kentucky, are almost three and one-half years behind their counterparts in non-Appalachian counties of western Kentucky. It is common to hold students back to repeat grades in Appalachia. Graff (1962) reports the Southern Appalachian Attitude Survey found 38% of rural eighth graders and 20% of rural twelfth graders in Appalachia had been held back one or more years. The Appalachian Regional Commission's Educational Advisory Committee found that Appalachian dropout rates between grades one and twelve averaged 65% in 1966 compared to 36% nationally (Parker 1970). In some Appalachian school districts, the

dropout rate is as high as 85% (Schrag 1978). Of the ten states in the nation with the lowest percentage of 16 and 17 year-olds in school, eight were in Appalachian states (Parker 1970). Of the population 25 years and older, only 10% in Appalachia had finished college in 1976 compared to 15% nationally (Appalachian Consortium 1981).

Purpose

Considering the above statements, the primary objective of this research was to conduct a pilot study investigating the educational motivation of rural native Appalachian eighth grade females in terms of educational attitudes, educational decisions, and educational self-concept. Educational attitudes included attitudes toward the usefulness of schooling, the value of schooling in the ideal sense, the value of schooling through the eighth grade, and the general attitude toward the upcoming experience of attending the only county high school (9th-12th grades). Educational decisions involved choices in curriculum/courses to be studied at the county high school, desire and determination to complete the high school experience, the significant others who influenced their educational decisions, desire to pursue an education and/or training beyond the high school level, and participation in school activities. Educational self-concept involved feelings of one's performance and security in the school environment (K-8), feelings/predictions of one's future performance at the local high school, and feelings of one's educational and career goals beyond the high school experience.

These three areas of investigation -- educational attitudes, decisions and self-concept -- were chosen because of the high dropout rate of rural native Appalachian students at the county high school. Thus, two main questions that needed to be answered were: (1) What are eighth grade Appalachian students thinking and feeling about their educational and career goals as they complete their elementary school experience (K-8) and are about to enter high school? (2) What influences these students to dropout after ninth grade? It was the intent

of this pilot study to shed some light on these two questions. (Females were only involved at this time due to time and money constraints. During the next year, males will be also involved in a larger research project dealing with the same research problem.)

Methods

Two main methods of data collection were used in this study -- structured interviews and observation. The structured interview consisted of a 2-3 hour interview with each graduating eighth grade female who volunteered and who had written parental permission to participate in the research project. The questionnaire which was used for the interview consisted of fifty open-ended questions divided into the following categories: (1) background information (e.g. family, age, sex, etc.); (2) educational attitudes; (3) educational decisions; and, (4) educational self-concept. All interviews were taped and later transcribed. This interview took place after the interviewees had completed their elementary school experience, but before they entered the local high school.

The observation aspect of the research project consisted of two segments. The first segment consisted of observing the interviewees during their orientation-visitation day at the county high school. The researcher participated in this visitation in the same manner as the incoming freshmen did, carefully monitoring the interviewees' reactions and questions concerning the high school environment. The second segment consisted of the researcher observing the interviewees daily during the first three weeks at the county high school in different classes and activities and taking detailed notes of the interviewees' interaction and reaction to the new school environment. In addition, periodic observations were made during the entire school year by the researcher in order to observe how the subjects had adjusted to the high school experience.

At the end of the academic school year, an exit interview was conducted with each of the original interviewees. This interview included

the interviewees' perceptions of the high school upon completion of the ninth grade and their future participation and performance at the high school.

Upon the completion of the exit interview, the content of both structured interviews and the observations was then analyzed in terms of educational attitudes, educational decisions, and educational self-concept.

Data Source

The sample consisted of 27 rural native Appalachian (both parents and interviewee were born in the Appalachian region) eighth grade females who had just finished their elementary school experience (K-8) at two rural county elementary schools and who were entering freshmen at the county high school. This particular Appalachian county has only one high school and is located in a University town of approximately 12,000, with the total county population being approximately 30,000. Thus, both town students and rural students must attend the same high school with rural students being bussed to the high school.

Results

Upon completion of the content analysis of the information collected from the structured interviews and the observation aspect of the research project, the following are the main conclusions:

(1) Educational Attitudes

(a) Appalachian females, upon entering high school (ninth grade), think the main purpose of their formal education has been to improve their learning abilities, their future chances for employment and monetary gain, and generally themselves as adults. (Eighty percent of the interviewees planned to have a career after the completion of high school, a training school, or college.)

(b) Appalachian females generally feel some ambivalence and uneasiness toward their entrance into high school, but on a whole think the experience will be positive and helpful toward their future careers.

(What was most feared was the lack of attention and personal contact they would receive from the high school faculty due to the large student population of 1100. The interviewees came from small, K-8 elementary schools, 250 student population, and had never experienced having more than one teacher per school year. One hundred percent of the interviewees expressed this concern.)

(2) Educational Decisions

(a) Appalachian females, upon entering high school (ninth grade) have a definite opinion about a career choice upon completion of high school, a training school, or college. (Ninety percent of the interviewees were determined to complete high school, with most wanting to go to college or a training school. Interviewees whose mothers were housewives only, did not want to follow the mother's pattern.)

(b) Appalachian females are most strongly encouraged by their mothers to do well in school and complete their high school education. (In addition, 60% of the interviewees were strongly encouraged by an extended female family member, e.g. aunt, grandmother, to do well in school and complete their high school education.)

(c) Appalachian females are mainly rewarded verbally for their success in school; no monetary rewards are generally given by their parents. (Ninety-nine percent of the interviewees were given only verbal praise for their successes in school. The vast majority of these praises came from the interviewees' mothers.)

(3) Educational Self-Concept

(a) Appalachian females generally feel very secure in their small rural school environment (K-8). (Seventy percent of the interviewees said nothing worried them in their elementary school environment. Whereas, the other 30% were only concerned about their performance in one subject area.)

(b) Appalachian females place a lot of value on friendships and the interaction with their friends in the school environment. (Ninety percent of the interviewees thought one of the most interesting and securing aspects of the school environment was their friendships,

especially since they live in more isolated areas of the county and cannot visit their friends easily.)

(4) General Conclusion of Results

By mid-year, the interviewees who had adjusted satisfactorily (65%) to the high school environment were making positive progress in terms of academic achievement and social-emotional adjustment. However, 35% of the interviewees (15% more than the researcher had predicted from the first structured interview information) were stagnant or struggling with the high school environment in terms of academic, social, and emotional adjustment. This was substantiated by the exit interview which was conducted upon completion of the ninth grade -- almost 35% of the interviewees were having serious doubts about the completion of their high school education. Most of these concerns were attributed to feelings of isolation, loneliness at the high school and lack of personal contact with the high school faculty.

Educational Importance and Conclusion

There is an absence of adequate data about females in Appalachia. Virtually nothing systematic is known about the interaction of factors like ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status with achievement and educational motivation in Appalachian females. The earlier picture of rural Appalachian women as submissive, non-achievement oriented, quiet, docile home-makers has recently been strongly challenged. This earlier, distorted version of Appalachian women was created by writers who took "...a pinch of Miss Scarlet, a spoonful of Amanda Wingfield, a cupful of Melanie Wilkes, and three of Pearl S. Buck's Chinese peasant women, stirred well, and produced the Appalachian mountain woman" (Beaver 1976: 4). More recent research and writing has suggested that this view of Appalachian women has resulted from the male-bias of previous researchers and by a cultural-bias which mistakenly confused public manners for internal qualities and social status (Kahn 1972; Lord and Pattan-Crowdel 1979).

Female Appalachian adolescents, about to enter womanhood, do have achievement and educational goals. Specifically from this pilot study, one gets the picture of eighth grade Appalachian females feeling very secure in their elementary school environment, having definite and positive life and career expectations, but feeling ambivalent about the upcoming high school experience due to predicted less personal contact from the high school faculty. However, after about midpoint in the freshman year of high school, there seems to be a breaking point in which the rural Appalachian female begins to succeed more strongly in school or begins to struggle more desperately, with this struggle being largely attributed to this actual or perceived lack of personal contact with the high school faculty.

Thus, rural native Appalachian females must somehow be made to view the high school faculty as caring people who do want to have personal contact with their students beyond the teaching role; and, the high school faculty must actually extend more personal contact to these students before they enter the ninth grade. Appalachian females must be made to feel more secure in the larger high school environment in order to succeed and want to complete their high school experience.

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